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'Pa-jew-cah': Reclaiming the History of Paducah's Jewish Community

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'Pa-jew-cah': Reclaiming the History of Paducah's Jewish Community



Presenter: Hannah Newberry
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Janice W. Fernheimer



Late 1970s- 1980s
With a new mall opening, many of the Jewish-owned businesses in downtown Paducah close, and the Jewish population begins to decline steeply. The last full-time Rabbi left Temple Israel in 1988, and student Rabbis from Hebrew Union College now serve the congregation.

1963
The Broadway synagogue is torn down and replaced with an updated building on Joe Clifton Drive.

Late 1800s-1980s
Jewish-owned local businesses- from tobacco wholesale to alcohol distillation to retail dominated downtown Paducah's landscape.

1924
Pictured here is the Hebrew School class of Temple Israel around the height of the Jewish population in Paducah.

1862
Under General Order No. 11, 30 Jewish families are forced to leave Paducah by General Ulysses S. Grant, who believed the Jewish community was engaging in a cotton black market and selling to the Confederacy. Under pressure from Jewish community members who traveled to Washington, D.C., President Abraham Lincoln rescinded the order in 1863, allowing the families to return.

1821
Paducah, KY is founded near the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers. A river city, it provided a port for travelers on the Ohio River.

1840s
The first Jewish settlers began arriving in Paducah.

1864
Incorporated by A. Goldsmith, M. Uri, C. Frank, and D. Wolff, the Chevra Yeshrun Burial Society is the first Jewish communal institution established in Paducah.

Vital Statistics- Jewish Populations

City	1907	1937	1968
Louisville	8,000	13,800	8,500
Lexington	350	660	1,200
Paducah	260	800	175
Kentucky	10,090	17,894	11,200

Introduction

When imagining Kentucky's religious heritage, most people picture churches, not synagogues. Yet historian Lee Shai Weissbach demonstrates that Kentucky's first synagogue was built in Louisville in 1849, and Jews had been living in the Commonwealth almost as long as it existed. Kentucky's Jewish heritage is rich and varied as illustrated by Arwen Donahue's *This is Home Now: Kentucky's Holocaust Survivors Speak*, Deborah Weiner's *Coalfield Jews: An Appalachian History*, and Amy Shevitz's *Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: A History*. While each of these texts refers to Paducah as an early and important Jewish settlement, none offers exclusive scholarly attention to what is now Kentucky's third largest Jewish population center. Supported by the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence and the UK Jewish Studies Summer Undergraduate Research Award, this study seeks to fill this gap in scholarship and provide more visibility to Jewish Kentucky generally and Jewish Paducah specifically. The author conducted three original oral history interviews, two with individuals who had lived memory of the Paducah Jewish community and one who is an active participant in that community. By closely analyzing the extant scholarship to contextualize first-hand accounts of Paducah's Jewish community, I call attention to a history that few know about. This study seeks to promote understanding of one of Paducah's most historically important ethnic groups, and thus show how Paducah's, as well as Kentucky's, heritage is far more diverse and inclusive than outsiders often realize.



Wilma Newberry (above, quotes to the right)

"You know, I can remember going... to Paducah for things. Christmas shopping was a huge event. Uh, downtown Paducah was just a lot of fun to go Christmas shopping. Because it would just be packed, you know. Finding a parking spot, I can remember, was the biggest challenge. Because... there wasn't enough parking spots. And, uh, so once you got a parking spot, then you were able to just walk from Finkel's--or there was another place called the Trad shop that we went to for clothes. Uh, but you could just walk anywhere downtown."



Dr. Laurie Ballew (above, quotes to the right)

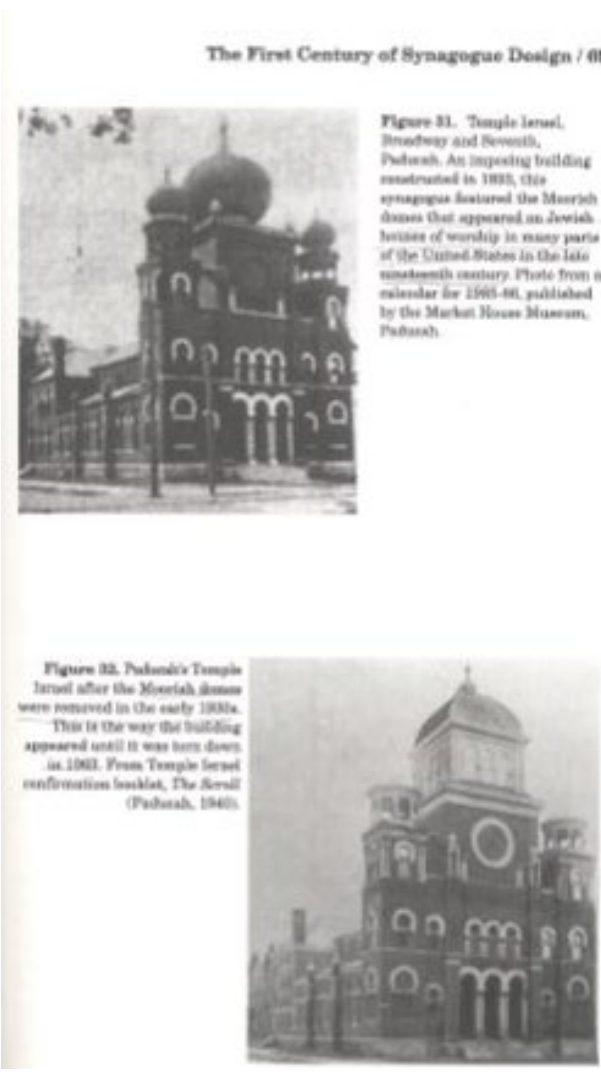
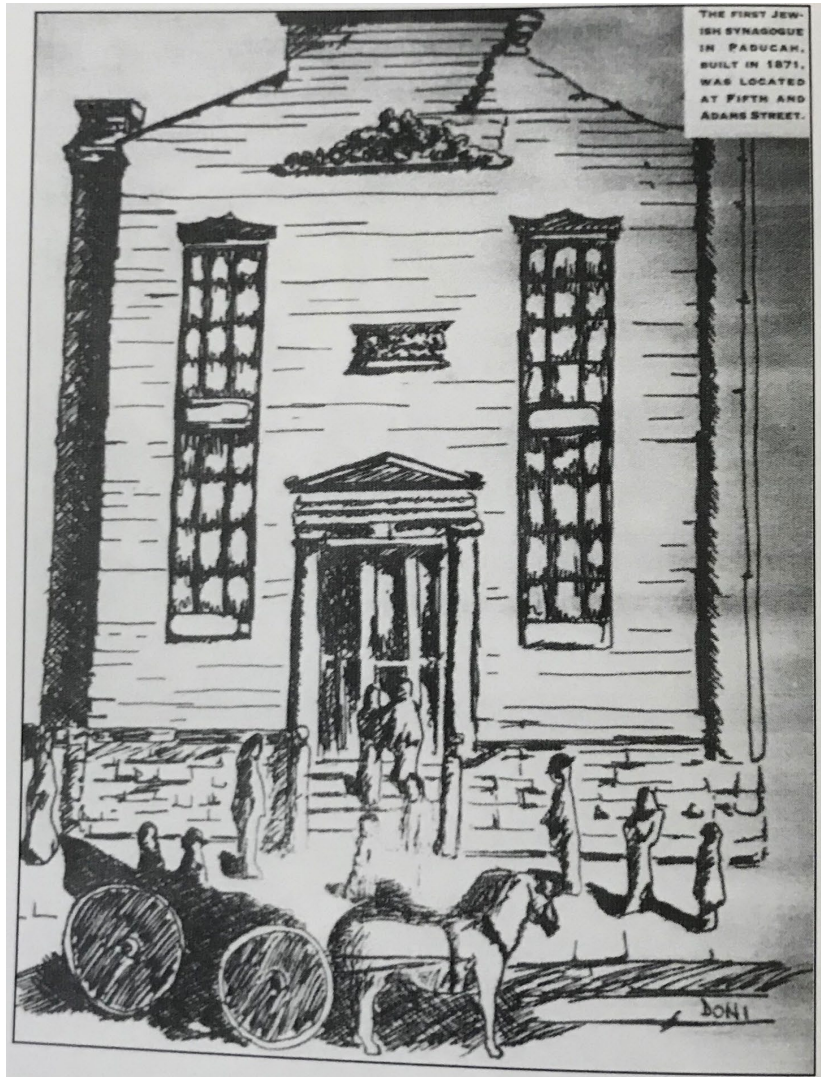
"--the boss was talking to him [Irving Strobing] one day, and he was saying something--I think it might have been in Jewish--and the boss said, 'If you keep acting like that, you're going to go to hell.' And he said, 'I've already been there.' And the boss said, 'What do you mean, you've already been there?' And he said, 'Well, I spent forty-some months in a prison camp working my tail off from daylight to dark in Japan during World War II.' 'Oh, well, I'm--I'm glad I asked. I'm glad to know you have been to hell.'"

H. Newberry: "Which stores were Jewish-owned that you visited as a kid?"
W. NEWBERRY: "Uh, Carlick--Carlick's had a men's store, and that's where I bought my suit I got married in."



Brandon Newberry (above, quotes to the left)

"But... the way I've done being president is, ah, not just, ah, kind of managing the daily, monthly things that are required, and, ah, being the leader of the board and the congregation. But being a catalyst, getting things done for the synagogue itself, the building itself. And, um, getting us involved in community activity. I think that's really important for us to, um, to have a presence in the community."



Methodology

I conducted interviews with Dr. Laurie Ballew, Wilma Newberry, and Brandon Newberry for inclusion in the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project, housed at UK's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. I worked with Drs. Janice Fernheimer and Beth Goldstein to create the questions and then conducted the interviews, which were then transcribed by a third party. I authenticated transcripts and indexed the interviews using the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) to make them more searchable for academics around the world. The interviews are available online at <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7w6m33529z>. Dr. Ballew was selected because she is the current president of Temple Israel, and she grew up in the area, attending the synagogue in the 1950s and 1960s. Wilma Newberry, my grandfather, was selected because he has lived memory of the Paducah Jewish community from the 1940s to the present. Brandon Newberry, my father, was selected because he also has lived memory of the Paducah Jewish community from the 1970s to the present day.

References

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